

A Woman and GDR Society: A Parallel History in *Her Third*

By Erika Richter

Der Dritte (Her Third) is a pivotal film in the history of East German narrative cinema. It proved that artistic power, critical consciousness, aplomb, and cinematic originality could not be silenced. It came out in 1972 following a period of torpor caused by a politically motivated ban on an entire year of film production in December 1965. This movie appeared as the first light on the darkened horizon of GDR cinema and continues to affirm its own cinematic brilliance today. *Her Third* is a story about women's emancipation. Margit Fliesser, the main character, is presented with a number of situations that test her strength and resolve. As a child when her mother died, she witnessed the neighbors ransacking the apartment, even ripping the sheets off the deathbed. She grew up as an orphan in a deaconess' house and was subjected to isolation and a restrictive religious life imposed on her by the church. Yet Margit delivered herself from this by studying mathematics and later entering into a career as a computer scientist. She eventually becomes financially and mentally independent. But is she happy? There still remains the issue of her potential inner liberation and the difficulty of finding happiness.

After two long term relationships that both fail, she ends up alone with two children. Based on her experience, she makes a firm resolve: the next man, her third, she will consciously choose only after thoughtful scrutiny. With courage and ardor, she resists traditional expectations, but does so also out of fear of fulfilling the stereotype of women as passive and weak. She galvanizes herself, uncertain (as is the audience) as to whether or not her resolve makes her happier. The film leaves this question open, despite the wedding at the end.

Amidst this woman's story, *Her Third* provides at the same time an apt and unconventional look at the historical development of east Germany from the end of the war to the seventies. It shows the poverty and moral dilapidation of the immediate postwar period, the enthusiasm at the new beginning the fifties promised, and the normalization that occurred in domestic relationships in the seventies which led to a certain resignation. At that time society's lofty collective goals dissipated and the issue of individual happiness became more important.

The protagonist's experience lends a unique insight to the GDR's image of its own history. Jutta Hoffmann portrays a woman filled with vitality and obstinacy. Her character is both affectionate and self-confident, cuddly and recalcitrant. She is searching for the love of her life and goes her own way in spite of it. The character's complexity is imparted through the actress's entire composure and gestures, which one could describe as modern, timeless and utterly contemporary in the same breath. Her movements and manner of speaking have a hazy, ironic quality; she talks dismissively about things that are very important. At the same time, she is capable of powerful, tumultuous emotions, such as when she discovers her younger child may go blind. She is neither sentimental nor coolly scientific. Words fail to describe her screen presence, as it is ineffably cinematic and original.

When the film came out, many women in the GDR felt that the figure of Margit Fliesser mirrored their desires and fears, since she had the same problems with love and life that they had. The actress's playfulness and that of the film in general—both which lightened any dark, serious undertone—gave women hope that they could overcome their problems too.

Egon Günther's very unique cinematic language always allows the fact that film is something which is "created" shine through and that it is never simply about representing reality. Everyday observances mesh together with stylized scenes; life's trials and tribulations are frequently broken up with comic moments. He creates a need for a comfortable distance between the individual viewer and the dramatic scenes and then fulfills it. Within

this stylistic concept, the entrancing Jutta Hoffmann unleashes all of her hypnotic power. Her most genuine female figure is brought to life right before our eyes in a film that preserves her character's depth and provocative power to this day.

Erika Richter (1938-2020) was a well-known script developer and dramaturg at the DEFA Studio for Feature Films. She worked on many important productions, including *The Land beyond the Rainbow* (1991), *Coming Out* (1988), *The Actress* (1988), *Apprehension* (1981) and *The Bicycle* (1981). She was particularly interested in films by women and contemporary stories with strong female characters. As a film critic, Richter was fascinated with the cinemas of Eastern Europe and Africa. She generously shared her film expertise with colleagues and was involved in film programs at the Babylon and Arsenal cinemas in Berlin. From 1990 to 2004, she was on the selection committee for the Forum des Jungen Films (Young Film Forum) program at the Berlin International Film Festival and contributed to its informational materials. For her important contributions to (East) German cinema, she was awarded the Camera at the 2003 Berlin International Film Festival and the DEFA Foundation's Best Film Programming Award in 2012.